

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
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A few weeks later New York had a spell of Indian summer. Though it was October, Hugh took off his blue blazer for the walk south to Kyle's, happy to be going to a cocktail/new works viewing party at his good friend's loft and even happier not to be going on yet another date, especially with someone new. Repeating the story of his life, listening to them repeat theirs with a similarly weary tone, probing for hints as to possible future discordances, navigating the first kiss and all the firsts of a stranger becoming an intimate: all of this had been scary at first, then intriguing, better than watching TV, more suspenseful than the last innings of the seventh game of the World Series, or even—sacrilege!—the best of Hitchcock. But in recent months, the last six fix-ups, fun or no, had become repetitive and predictable in their general outline.

As he contemplated the looming fall and winter, a disappointing but mostly comforting suspicion had taken residence in Hugh's head, that there wasn't a special someone out there who could ignite the kindling of dating into the fire of love. What he had confided to Francine the previous spring seemed truer than ever: he no longer felt capable of headlong passion. Or perhaps romantic yearnings had been an illusion of youth, mistaking desire for need. Recently he had come to what he fancied was a mature conclusion: that for all the differences between one woman and another there was an underlying sameness to their effect on him, and to his effect on them. Women, whether they were enthusiastic about him or not, admired his devotion to Amy. He, whether he found them dull or thrilling, admired their earnest desire to enjoy and improve life for themselves and everyone they cared about.

Of course, he knew there were evil women, from books and rumor anyway. He knew there were selfish women. But he hadn't dated an evil or selfish woman and wondered if those were traits that revealed themselves only when a woman was in a relationship. He also knew there were unkind, critical and unloving women—his mother, for example—but they seemed to have gone missing from the world after Amy's death, as if once the word went out that Hugh was alone the entire gender had been infused with sympathy and forbearance.

But admiration was not excitement. He felt the lack of it on both sides. Maybe the reason for the cautiousness of middle-aged daters was their long histories. Hugh and the women he met had already loved and lost, been besotted and disappointed by their children, their friends and careers, disillusioned by political causes and the private lives of their heroes—how could the charm of any date promise a future without heartbreak?

For nearly five weeks he had managed to avoid even considering a future relationship. He had said nothing to Francine about her odd proposal, taking advantage of her not giving him a time limit or raising the subject again. And after he had several times excused himself from another date with the pleasant but uninspiring Judy, she had become busy: tending to her elderly mother, a crisis at her job, a reunion for something—he hadn't kept close track, hoping, as seemed to be coming true, that a lack of contact would become permanent.

So he felt safe and content to be alone when he spotted Sue Roth walking toward him on West Broadway. He had been preoccupied by that New York City fetish, real estate, as he crossed into SoHo from his soon-to-be-lost home in the Village, wondering how the hell Kyle could afford to live in his thousands of golden square feet. Although they were old and close friends he had never had the nerve to ask Kyle whether, as envious mutual acquaintances grumbled, it was a richly endowed trust fund that allowed him to be a rigorously pure artist

who made sculptures too large and too unpleasant to be bought by anyone except the occasional hedge fund manager desperate to acquire hipness.

These ruminations were chased away by the sight of Sue, which triggered a zing of excitement from the base of his spine to the top of his skull, along the way miraculously clearing his sinuses. She wasn't looking his way; she was surveying gallery windows or restaurant customers seated at sidewalk tables. Should he stop in his tracks and force her to say hello? Or nod and smile in passing, plan to be in touch later? Getting to know her well was suddenly an urgent desire, although he hadn't thought about her once in the nearly two years that had passed since his mother-in-law's attempted fix-up at the country club.

He didn't have long to be anxious. Soon she was within ten feet. He noted her hair was longer and severely straight compared to his memory of a shorter cut arranged in gentle curls, waves on an otherwise tranquil bay. The hairdo emphasized the elegant lines of her brow and delicate features. Her intelligent, amused gray eyes, as they passed over him with no sign of recognition, were just as he remembered them. That a glimpse of him didn't provoke instant recognition sent a new shudder of excitement and worry through his system. *Why am I so excited to see her?* he wondered as the fluttering persisted.

He hadn't forgotten that only seconds ago he had felt ready to give up, if not on relationships then on having another love in his life like he'd had with Amy. Yet as he got closer to Sue, elegant in a black-and-white striped dress that hugged her slim figure, he was in a dither about how to say hello, especially in a way that would seem casual but guarantee she noticed. He'd have to do something to attract her attention, since she was still looking beyond him as they were about to pass . . .

Sue's eyes lit on him, this time flickering with recognition.

“Hi!” Hugh called—or, he feared, desperately shouted—and stopped walking.

“Well, hello, Hugh!” Sue stopped and leaned in to kiss his cheek, right hand resting on his forearm for balance, rising slightly on the balls of her feet with the grace of a ballet dancer. All done quickly, yet without anxious haste. As she withdrew, she added, “I’m so glad I ran into you,” with enough conviction that he half-expected she had a favor to ask.

“Me too, me too,” he stuttered with excitement. His mind raced, wondering how to make sure this wouldn’t be their last meeting in human history. Kyle’s private viewing would be a small group, no more than two dozen friends and acquaintances whose enthusiasm was supposed to encourage a handful of prospective buyers, but especially two gallery owners he hoped would take him on. There would be wine and finger food. Old friends, such as Hugh, were expected to linger afterward and order food to be delivered, or go out for a proper meal, but Kyle of all people would understand if he skipped out early in pursuit of a woman. Asking Sue if she was free for dinner suddenly seemed right, though at the same instant it occurred to him how odd it might appear for him to invite her to dinner on the spot after he had ignored her existence for two years, and how much odder if he followed up with the fact that first he had to go to a cocktail party. Should he ask her to join him at Kyle’s?

“So, how have you been?” she said. “Actually, I know from my mother you’re doing very well. Your in-laws just adore you. And I hear how sweet you are to them, calling once a week, seeing them regularly, not just on holidays. My mother thinks you’re the perfect man.” Sue’s lips fought to suppress her amusement at this notion.

“Because I’m kind to in-laws?”

“Exactly. I didn’t know that was my mother’s standard but I guess it makes sense.”

She paused before adding, “For her.” She smiled that sly smile of hers, aloof yet welcoming, which he remembered vividly from their first meeting. She paused for him to say something; when he didn’t, she said, “Well, I’ll let you—”

“Are you free for dinner?” he blurted.

She blanched. “Tonight?”

“I’m going to a friend’s loft now to see his latest work, he’s a sculptor. You know: cocktails, a few people he’s hoping will buy, and supportive friends who are too poor to, like me. Should last an hour or an hour and a half and then I’m free for dinner. I could meet you somewhere or you could come to Kyle’s—”

“I have dinner plans tonight,” she said. “I’m on my way there now. Rain check?”

Her sly smile reappeared, and he perceived a trace of triumph. *She’s flattered I’m interested*, he thought and felt a measure of triumph himself.

“Great,” he said, taking out his Blackberry and asking, “Your number?”

“Send me an email,” she said. “It’s sueroth1, all small letters, at AOL dot com. I’m number one!” she added with a smile. “At least at AOL. Shoot me an email and we’ll have dinner.” She took his wrist with what he noticed were long elegant fingers, like Amy’s and cool like Amy’s. She squeezed and let go. She appeared ready to depart when instead she rested back on her heels, cocked her head and wondered aloud, “Did you say you’re going to an opening? Something about sculpture?”

“Not an opening.” He explained, and she asked him to repeat Kyle’s name.

“Don’t know him,” she said in response.

“Are you a collector?”

“I dated a man . . .” She hesitated. “He bought art,” she added with a trace of what Hugh imagined, or hoped, was contempt. He noted that she’d used the past tense. “I have about half an hour before my dinner date,” she said. “Can I tag along and take a peek at the new work?” She laughed, with surprising gaiety. “Not that I can afford to buy anything or that I have any place to put it.”

The exact reverse of what Hugh had schemed, yet he was thrilled. While they walked the few blocks to Greene Street, she asked how he had met Kyle, and Hugh explained they’d been assigned to be roommates as freshmen at Middlebury. “Otherwise, I’m sure he would never have given a square like me the time of day.” He raved about his old friend’s precocious talent and admitted Kyle was a womanizer when Sue reacted with horror at the news of Kyle’s three marriages. “My God, how exhausting,” she said.

“I love him, he’s a brilliant, hard-working artist, but he’s had a chaotic personal life.”

“A free spirit,” she commented, flashing her wry smile. “That’s what we call the bad boys. And we girls love bad boys, don’t we?”

Hugh didn’t like the sound of that. Maybe she would fall for Kyle before he had a chance to impress her. At Middlebury that had happened plenty of times, Kyle beguiling his friends’ prospects with his curly blond hair, sparkling blue eyes, and radical speechifying. Thirty years had trimmed Kyle’s hair to a Marine-like crew-cut, his baby blues were framed by crinkles, and his talk lay to the right of Bill O’Reilly’s, but the parade of women in and out of his life hadn’t slowed. *Or maybe women just can’t quit us*, Hugh thought, since even bald dull Hugh seemed popular these days and certainly thirty years hadn’t improved his look.

“How come you didn’t tell me you were dating a great beauty?” Kyle asked mischievously when Hugh introduced Sue.

Her clever smile appeared, but then she wounded Hugh: “Because we’re not.”

“That’s a tragedy,” Kyle replied. “At least for my man Hugh. And a blunder on your part. There may be a kinder and gentler man on the planet than Hughie but my guess is he’s been murdered.”

“I only meant we just bumped into each other on the street a few minutes ago,” Sue said, flustered for the first time in Hugh’s brief experience with her. Kyle had succeeded in discombobulating her. “I invited myself along.”

“Good move,” Kyle said. He immediately took Sue by the elbow, turning his back on a big-boned, six-foot woman wearing glasses with thick round black frames who seemed eager for his attention. Hugh soon learned she was one of the gallery owners Kyle wanted to impress. And yet Kyle had abandoned her, leading Sue toward one of his enormous sculptures made of iconic New York City street objects—slats from a park bench, half a fire hydrant, the top of a street lamp all mashed into slabs of concrete, creating the detritus of a well-groomed and bloodless apocalypse.

“I think they evoke climate change more than hydrogen bombs, don’t you?” the gallery owner asked Hugh while they watched Kyle and Sue ambling between the elegant wrecks, farther and father away from them.

“Maybe it’s gentrification,” Hugh said. “That’s what’s really destroying New York.”

“I disagree,” she said. “New York is finally becoming habitable.”

“Not unless you’re rich.”

“Oh, come off it,” she said, throwing her arm out to dismiss his comment, nearly whacking him with two thick black rectangular plastic bracelets with edges that looked dangerously sharp. “No one in this room is poor.”

Hugh saw Kyle laugh uproariously at something Sue said. His appreciation evidently required a physical follow through: he put an arm around slender Sue, who in heels was almost as tall as he. He pulled her into his burly arms for a squeeze and she smiled with delight. All the way across the crowded and noisy room Hugh could hear his old friend exclaim: “Brilliant! My God, that’s brilliant! You see right through my bullshit.”

Hugh’s cheeks were hot. He was feeling a sudden and absolute conviction that he was in love. Straight through to his core, exactly like the second time he met Amy, waiting with friends to get in to see *Dog Day Afternoon* on a chilly fall Saturday, her round, friendly face framed by brilliant red and yellow Vermont leaves. He had fallen in love on the spot, like being slapped, and just now he had fallen in love on a SoHo street, and he was terribly worried that Sue, allowing herself to remain encircled by Kyle’s bearish arms, was about to become infatuated with his Lothario of a best friend.

“Did you say something?” the gallery owner asked.

“I am,” Hugh said, hoping this confession would explain his humiliated cheeks.
“I am poor.”